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Beyond land grabs: new insights on land struggles and global agrarian change

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ABSTRACT

The conjunction of climate, food, and financial crises in the late 2000s triggered renewed interest in farmland and agribusiness investments around the world. This phenomenon became known as the 'global land grab' and sparked debates among social movements, NGOs, academics, government and international development agencies worldwide. In this introduction, we critically analyse the 'state of the literature' so far, and outline four areas that are moving the debate 'beyond land grabs'. These include: (1) the role of contract farming and differentiation among farm workers in the consolidation of farmland; (2) the broader forms of dispossession and mechanisms of control and value grabbing beyond 'classic' land grabs for agricultural production; (3) discourses about, and responses to, Chinese agribusiness investments abroad; and (4) the relationship between financialization and land grabbing. Ultimately, we propose new directions to deepen and even transform the research agenda on land struggles and agroindustrial restructuring around the world.

KEYWORDS

Global land grab; contract farming; agricultural labour; control grabbing; dispossession; financialization

Introduction: state of the literature

Over a decade has passed since a spike in food and commodity prices articulated with the global financial crisis to trigger a massive wave of farmland investments worldwide. The first set of publications on this topic (from 2008 to around 2012) was largely based on public announcements, and focused on identifying the drivers of large-scale acquisitions of farmland, calling special attention to capital-rich/resource-poor countries such as China, South Korea, and the Gulf states making investments in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America (Cotula et al., 2009; FAO, 2011; GRAIN, 2008; HLPE, 2011; IFPRI, 2009; Oxfam, 2011; World Bank, 2010). It largely turned on accusations by social movements, NGOs, and critical scholars that large-scale land acquisitions, led primarily by international investors, were poised to displace peasants, undermine local food security/sovereignty, and drive deforestation in a rush for profits and resources, while prominent multilateral development agencies and less critical scholars raised the prospect that renewed interests in agricultural investments could bring much-needed finance for underdeveloped countries and regions (ibid.) Since this first moment, academic research has played a key role articulating these debates about the 'global land grab'. This work has often been organized through high-

profile international conferences, such as the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) meetings at the University of Sussex in 2011 and at Cornell University in 2012, and special issues of major journals of agrarian studies, particularly the *Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)* (Borras et al., 2011; Peluso & Lund, 2011; White et al., 2012; see also, Borras et al., 2012a), which incorporated much research from scholars in the LDPI network.¹

After this first wave of scholarship consolidated the critique of the ‘global land grab’ originally set by social movements, questioning the pro-investment narratives of certain multi-lateral institutions and NGOs, a second wave of publications began to emerge from around 2012 to 2014 that exposed a more complex reality. Some scholars began to raise questions regarding the significance of land grabs and if there is anything new about them, and as some high-profile large-scale land deals collapsed others began to call for research that goes ‘beyond the hype’ generated by the first wave of literature on the global land grab to a more nuanced approach (Amanor, 2012; Amanor & Moyo, 2008; Franco et al., 2013; Zoomers & Kaag, 2014). Hence, scholars began to scrutinize journalistic claims more carefully, and debate the methodological frameworks and theoretical scope of research on land grabbing (Edelman et al., 2013; Fairbairn et al., 2014). The complicity of conservation agencies and discourses was revealed (Fairhead et al., 2012), the significance of not only land but also water for agroindustrial investments was identified (Mehta et al., 2012), and land grabbing for mineral extraction, urban development, and infrastructure construction were also brought into debate, showing that ‘food crisis’ alone does not fully condition the phenomenon (Geenen & Hoenke, 2014; Kröger, 2014; Levien, 2012; Pedlowski, 2013). In-depth research began to expose the role of state actors and local elites from the Global South to temper the exclusive focus on international investors (Keene et al., 2015; Oliveira, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013), and critiques of the pro-investment narrative gained traction as the limitations of global governance were exposed (Borras et al., 2013; Goetz, 2013; Margulis et al., 2013; Voget-Kleschin & Ott, 2013). In short, a more complex set of actors, interests, and local-global dynamics appeared to be at play, and this called for further, more empirically rich and theoretically nuanced research. In our assessment, the most important contributions from this second wave of scholarship are the methodological challenges that were identified in the first wave of the ‘land grab debate,’ in particular: questioning the epistemology of major land-deal databases, the focus and assumptions of much of the literature that foreign investors and large-scale land deals represented the bulk of the phenomenon, and calling for more fieldwork-based case studies that could advance political and academic debates with more sound evidence and more nuanced conceptualization of ongoing agrarian transformations. One of the most prominent collections of such methodological debates was edited by Scoones et al. (2013), including significant contributions by Edelman (2013) and Oya (2013) in addition to their editorial introduction. In addition to *JPS*, the citations above also illustrate how such research was often collected in special issues of *Development and Change*, the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, *Third World Quarterly*, the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, *Water Alternatives*, and *Globalizations* itself.

Since then, a third-wave of empirically-rich research began to emerge that answers that call for better methodology and more nuanced theorization, revealing not only the advancement of agribusiness capital but also the political reactions ‘from below’ (Hall et al., 2015), the rise of flex crops and commodities (Borras et al., 2016), the articulation of farmland investments with gender, generational, and climate change politics in particular regions (Corbera et al., 2017; Park & White, 2017; Schoenberger et al., 2017), and the crucial role of financial capital from the Global North in the dynamics of major land acquisitions worldwide, including speculative mining ventures (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Kröger, 2018; Goldstein & Yates, 2017; Kröger, 2016; Visser et al., 2015). This

third-wave of debate about the ‘global land grab’ continues to flourish across various forums, including all the journals mentioned above, and in several more journals of geography, environmental studies, agrarian studies, and political economy, and increasingly in full monographs as well, some of which we cite in the sections below.²

As this new empirical research emerges, both political and theoretical arguments evolve with the changing dynamics of capitalist globalization. These include calls to deepen and expand research ‘beyond land grabbing’ as originally conceived (e.g. Pedersen & Buur, 2016), focusing especially on new forms of commodification of land driven not by agriculture alone, foreign investments, and illegal dispossession, but rather the legal concentration of land by financiers, industrial and mining companies, domestic agribusinesses, and smaller-scale farmers themselves, examining the structures of power and authority that promote, condition, and may prevent land grabs and concentration, and tracing the reconfiguration of land rights over time with a broader geographical coverage. A themed issue of *Geoforum* entitled ‘Beyond Land Grabbing’ (ibid.) articulated this call most explicitly. However, it only contained an introductory editorial and three articles, all reviews of the literature until then, calling for further empirical research in these specific directions. The BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS), from which we drew most of the papers for this special issue, is one of the main forums where cutting-edge research has been advanced to answer precisely this call, reframing debates from optimistic celebrations of the ‘rise of the BRICS’ as an alternative to imperialism from the Global North, and simplistic critiques of ‘neo-colonialism’ from emerging economies across the Global South, towards a critique of global agrarian transformations that places socio-ecological struggles at the core of analysis (Oliveira & McKay, 2021).

Globalizations has been a key platform for the evolution of this literature, hosting an influential special issue at the turning point of the debate in 2013 on ‘Land Grabbing and Global Governance’ (volume 10, issue 1; Margulis et al., 2013), and many more articles since then that contributed fieldwork-based and theoretically innovative advances to this literature. This includes some in the recent special issue ‘BRICS and MICS: Implications for Global Agrarian Transformation’ (volume 15, issue 1; Cousins et al., 2018) that demonstrate how Brazil and Argentina are not merely targets of transnational farmland and agribusiness investments, but also major players in these investments across Latin America, and how the imagined prominence of Chinese land grabs in South America has been largely exaggerated, while taking place not through large-scale land deals but various smaller concessions in Southeast Asia, and similarly how land grabbing for boom crops has in fact deepened within China itself. That special issue emerged from the 3rd international BICAS conference in South Africa, 2015, and the current special issue includes research that expands upon and deepens analysis of these themes, based upon contributions to our 5th international BICAS conference in Moscow, 2017.

The nine papers in this collection represent some of the most cutting-edge, empirically-rich studies which continue to broaden and deepen our understanding of the ‘global land grab’ and the evolution of the debate about this phenomenon. The contributions selected cover most regions of the world, with a focus on the leading emerging economies and their engagements in the Global South, including Ghana and Uganda in Africa, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia in South America, China and Laos in Asia, Hungary in Europe, and Australia.

This collection is composed primarily by contributions from advanced PhD candidates and early career scholars, who are able to draw upon very recent in-depth fieldwork across the agrarian South, and who are themselves largely rooted in these regions. We were attentive to engage a diverse set of authors from across various regions and disciplines in the BRICS Initiative for Critical

Agrarian Studies, and the broader fields of geography, anthropology, and global studies. We trust these considerations help us assure not only geographical and disciplinary breadth, but also a critical diversity of voices and cutting-edge nature of the work that can indeed contribute with productive and illuminating insights to the literature.

In our introductory essay, we draw upon the articles in this issue, the existing land grab literature, and our own insights to discuss four clusters of key themes: (1) the role of contract farming and differentiation among farm workers in the consolidation of farmland; (2) the broader forms of dispossession and mechanisms of control and value grabbing beyond 'classic' land grabs for agricultural production; (3) discourses about, and responses to, Chinese agribusiness investments abroad; and (4) the relationship between financialization and land grabbing. After we examine each cluster below, we conclude with a discussion of ongoing gaps in the literature, and propose some new directions to deepen and expand the research agenda on the current dynamics and future of the phenomenon of land grabbing around the world.

Contract farming and farm workers in relation to the global land grab

While growing concerns over land grabs, dispossessions and the unsustainable ways of farming are voiced by scholars, activists, and various social groups, clusters of modifications, counter-movements, as well as alternatives have been developed to tackle the negative impacts of land grabbing, legitimize agribusiness projects and/or envisage a future with social and ecological sustainability. Contract farming is one of the most widespread schemes promoted by global development agencies and international policy makers as a way to expand agricultural investments by integrating the rural poor, rather than displacing them through large-scale farmland acquisitions. In doing so, proponents of contract farming attempt to characterize this as a 'win-win arrangement', supposedly beneficial to both the investors and the rural poor, advancing agribusiness investments without entailing direct dispossessions (FAO, 2013). Many sustainability certifications, such as the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), are also introduced to legitimize investments (e.g. oil palm plantations), combining the recognition of land rights and the promotion of contract farming as a 'win-win' strategy. These proposals seek legitimacy also in the promotion of family farms, which has already been established prominently in the agenda for food sovereignty and in anti-land grab discourses in many regions populated by large numbers of peasants and small farmers (*ibid.*).

In this special issue, contributions by Martiniello (2020) and Genoud (2020) problematize contract farming and question the 'win-win' assumptions through their studies of the sugarcane out grower scheme in Uganda and the 'Strategic Productive Alliance' (SPA) of palm oil in Colombia. These articles reveal a more complex set of dynamics in relation to land access and labour valuation than promoted by proponents of such arrangements. Contract farming is an agreement between a grower and a processor pertaining to the production of an agricultural commodity based upon a defined set of input supplies, relations of production, and commercialization agreements, framed as a vehicle of collaborative business models and a catalyst of inclusive development with increased political legitimization. Yet scholars of critical agrarian studies, geography, anthropology, and political ecology have consistently exposed the problems engendered by 'living under contract', which adversely incorporate rural livelihoods and environments into capitalist relations of production and trade, state-making projects, and global agroindustrial networks (Bellemare & Bloem, 2018; Little & Watts, 1994).

In this vein, Martiniello (2020) explores the political and economic drivers of contract farming and its socio-ecological implications in the development of Uganda's sugar industry, scrutinizing

the spatial and ecological dynamics of the production process. He argues that despite contract farming schemes not involving *prima facie* the dispossession or displacement of smallholders, they lead to forms of expulsion and/or marginalization of poor smallholders from sugar agro-extractive poles through social differentiation. Martiniello reminds us that the re-emergence of contract farming could be seen as part and parcel of the advancement and consolidation of the 'sugar commodity frontier', a 'sugarification' process which involves the maximization of value extraction from farmers, the appropriation by agribusiness and finance capital, and a regime of production which devaluates labour (wage and family) and nature through constant mechanism of cheapening (Patel & Moore, 2017), undermining livelihoods and landscapes. As Martiniello reaffirms, contract farming is an instrument to impose capitalist discipline for the exploitation of land, labour and nature, unmasking celebratory interpretations of it as alternative to land grabs.

In the case of Colombia, peasant participation into 'Strategic Productive Alliances' promoted by RSPO is also problematic in terms of their land access. Genoud (2020) argues that, SPAs, as a formalized relationship between producers and agricultural industries with the support of a public or private organism, are just a convenient way for palm oil companies to expand their production without facing judicial complication related to the history of land; while for peasants, their participation in SPAs is a basic requirement to obtain the RSPO label as well as the Colombian government's agricultural subsidies and land titles. By entering into a SPA, smallholders face a loss of autonomy of their working conditions and production processes, thus limiting their capacity to enjoy their human rights and benefit from the land. As a result, the options for them are either to refuse to take part in SPAs or to accept proletarianization, which exacerbates pressures for their displacement from the land. Thus, SPAs are not necessarily a redistributive 'win-win' strategy, particularly when the definition of sustainability conveyed by the RSPO does not ensure genuine guarantee for peasants' land access. Genoud shows that local contexts and practices are central to understand the impact of these sustainability certifications and who really benefits from such labels, calling for a human rights approach that recognizes the human right to land and acknowledges that contract farming should comply with human rights standards.

In West Africa, Gyapong (2020) highlights the complexities of agrarian transformations that have escaped the land grab debate in much of the recent literature. While anti-land grab discourses emphasize 'family farming' as a framework for food sovereignty, issues related to agricultural wage labour have been relegated to the background. Under the shadow of the global land rush and the hegemony of neoliberal governance of natural resources, food sovereignty movements often find themselves in contested positions, having to present broad claims and demands in defense of the peasantry as a whole, while also aware of class struggles and differentiated interests between small farmers and farm workers that should not be oversimplified (Borras et al., 2015; Edelman & Borras, 2016). Nevertheless, dispossession-focused framings tend to push important issues of rural wage workers – their food security, access to land and labour conditions – to the margins of land grab and food sovereignty debates. After presenting nuanced claims regarding the adverse impacts of land grabs as well as the dominant narratives of the food sovereignty discourse in West Africa, Gyapong reveals changing and conflicting interests, values and ideologies, which prioritize farmer-centered narratives and de-emphasize differentiation among, and diversity within the livelihoods of the peasantry. Gyapong draws attention the variegated forms of adversities among the marginalized, beyond family farmers, reasserting the need for well-established critiques in agrarian studies that are more attentive to other classes and social groups that suffer distinct forms of oppression and exploitation across different timelines and space, such as farm-workers' struggles around land and the exploitative and gendered labour relations in rural West Africa.

This cluster of papers provides an insightful entry point to revisit and reframe debates about land grabbing, contract farming, social differentiation, and agrarian struggles. They reveal the complexities of social realities in places where proposed alternatives to land grabs are situated. While putting on a cunning coat of ‘no land grabs’ and/or ‘no dispossessions’, many contract farming and sustainability certification schemes have their own imperatives of extracting as much profit and resources at the lowest cost within a short period, legitimizing farmland concentration and labour exploitation as poor farmers become adversely incorporated into global agroindustrial chains. A simplistic critique of agribusiness that hinges upon a counterpoint of ‘land grabbers vs. family farmers’ obfuscates various other forms of exploitation and agrarian struggles that remain central to agrarian dynamics.

There is, of course, a diversity of contract farming schemes which vary according to crop, ownership structure, contractual arrangement, scale, etc. (see Oya, 2012), and as such, ‘any effort to outline a general “theory” of contracting would be foolhardy and ultimately unproductive’ (Little & Watts, 1994, p. 5). Since contract farming arrangements have the potential to improve technology adoption, productivity, and the resilience of supply chains for processors and distributors, governments and non-government development agencies often adopt it as strategy to cultivate organic farming and other ‘sustainability transitions’ aimed at developing value chains that are intended to benefit rural producers and urban consumers alike (Gliessman et al., 2018; Tsui et al., 2017). Where these strategies have matured the most, however, such as in California’s organic food sector, it is evident that contract schemes between landowners, organic growers, and processors ultimately reproduce relations of dependence and exploitation that curtail the transformative potential of organic agriculture, and reinforce long-term tendencies of farmland concentration, labour exploitation, and unsustainable farming practices (Guthman, 2014). As contract farming schemes bring many peasants increasingly closer to the condition of proletarianization, these contributions in our special issue coalesce in critiques that move beyond the ‘global land grab’ as a framework for analysis and political struggle. Identifying new forms of dispossession beyond direct displacement for agribusiness investment is therefore a central task for critical scholarship in agrarian studies.

Land grabs and new forms of dispossession

Revealing the mechanisms and forms of dispossession, both overt and covert, direct and indirect, has been crucial to our understanding of the various dynamics of accumulation and resistance to land grabs. Many scholars have revived Marx’s concept of ‘primitive accumulation’ or have adopted Harvey’s framing of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ to help us understand this new land rush (see Hall, 2013; Kröger, 2014). In this special issue, Li and Pan (2020) analyse hidden forms of dispossession in China characterized by what they refer to as ‘expulsion by pollution’. ‘Expulsion by pollution’ is a form of dispossession which does not always result in the direct loss of control over the land, but creates the conditions by which people are driven from their lands due to pollution or contamination of the natural resources for which their livelihoods depend. This framing pushes us to think about the implications of land grabs and dispossession beyond direct forms of control, at various scales, and as a response to converging crises (Borras et al., 2012a). Instead, we are confronted with indirect, invisible, or hidden implications for those living in surrounding areas where new investments, land use change or industrial development take place. This challenges us to widen our scope in order to understand the broader socio-ecological impacts of land grabs and forms of dispossession beyond land tenure, which thwarts efforts to quantify the ‘messy hectares’ involved in land grab data (see Edelman, 2013). While Li and Pan make reference to ‘expulsion by pollution’ in

the context of industrial transfer in China, this concept calls for critical analyses to engage with socio-ecological relations more generally as mechanisms of agrarian change, transcending narrow and restrictive conceptualizations of land grabs that may not grasp the indirect and less visible, yet very real, implications for rural livelihoods.

Brawner (2020) similarly pushes us to broaden our analytical scope of dispossession to include not only landed property, but the ways in which identity, cultural heritage, and socio-ecological assemblages can be appropriated when land is grabbed. She draws on a case study from the Hungarian wine region of Tokaj – home to the luxury specialty wine Tokaji Aszú – to argue that land grabbing goes beyond the material value of landed property to the symbolic, place-based cultural elements embedded in the land and labour, or the *terroir*. *Terroir* represents the socio-cultural life of material sites and in the region of Tokaj forms part of the post-soviet Hungarian identity. Land grabs, and especially those by outsiders, thus become a threat to this identity and traditions of life on the land, as the value embedded in *terroir* is sought after by investors for capital accumulation. For Brawner, an analysis of land grabs must go beyond material value to encompass the broader socio-cultural features of the landscape. A deeper understanding of land beyond its material value and as a way to protect one's cultural identity may further help us comprehend growing support for nationalist-populist politics and their authoritarian tendencies (see McKay et al., 2020).

Both of these papers provide valuable contributions to the literature and our understanding of land grabs and dispossession. They continue to push our understanding of the implications of land grabs for agrarian transformations well beyond direct land dispossession as they were originally defined (McKay, 2016; Soto Baquero & Gómez, 2012). They add to the rich literature in critical agrarian studies on 'control grabbing' (Borras et al., 2012b) and 'value grabbing' (Andreucci et al., 2017) among others, that have enriched our understanding of the implications of land grabs beyond the obvious changes in landed property relations. 'Value grabbing' was put forth by Andreucci *et al.* to describe 'the appropriation of (surplus) value produced elsewhere through rent' (Andreucci et al., 2017, p. 31). Rather than the production of value through labour, this concept brings rent to the forefront of the analysis (see Harvey, 2010). Andreucci *et al.*, argue that 'the central dynamic at play is the instituting of property rights that are not used exclusively or even mainly to produce new commodities, but rather are mobilized to extract value through rent relations' (2017, p. 29). This commodification of 'assets' primarily for rent extraction include socio-ecological and cultural assemblages and 'produced natures' such as genetically modified organisms or the (cultural) values embedded in *terroir*. Andreucci *et al.* refer to such 'assets' as pseudo-commodities, a term used 'to reflect the fact that all or part of the exchange value of such assets is not produced' (2017, p. 30). In the case of the Hungarian wine region of Tokaj, it is the value embedded in *terroir*, which goes well beyond the material value of the land and its rents. Brawner's notion of 'grabbing *terroir*' expands our understanding of value grabbing, and value more generally, through an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural and ecological assemblages in place-based landscapes.

Similarly, 'control grabbing' (Borras et al., 2012b) delves deeper into the social relations of control and access over natural resources. This concept has helped us understand the ways in which capital's penetration of the countryside (e.g. via value-chain agriculture or contract farming) has generated particular social relations of production that enable some actors to control land and its productive resources without necessarily having physical control or tenure rights to the land-based resources in question (see McKay, 2018). What Li and Pan's concept of 'expulsion by pollution' adds to this literature is a framework that goes beyond the land or control grab in question to the broader implications for those living in proximity and who may equally suffer the

consequences of the land use change or industrial transfers due to the ‘negative externalities’ of pollution and contamination. Such forms of dispossession can often go unnoticed as they are not directly involved in any kind of land deal or even control grab and have not been as prominent in the land grab literature. In calling attention to China’s industrial pollution as a mechanism of peasant expulsion, moreover, Li and Pan also gesture to the need for reframing how China itself has been discussed so far in the ‘global land grab’ literature.

Discourses and responses to Chinese agribusiness investments abroad

China has been the location of widespread land expropriations and transfers through domestic agro-industrial restructuring, including readily recognizable forms of direct displacement for agroindustrial development, and more indirect and invisible forms of displacement, as demonstrated above.³ However, these domestic dynamics have been largely obscured in the way China is often portrayed as a leading land grabber beyond its borders. In fact, the *supposedly* preeminent role of China and other land-poor/capital-rich countries has been a hallmark of the latest round land grabbing around the world (Borras et al., 2011; GRAIN, 2008; Margulis et al., 2013), and this portrayal continues to be replicated in international media even though early studies already suggested this depiction is overstated (Hofman & Ho, 2012). Evidently, these narratives draw from geopolitical imaginaries and world-systems analyses that envision the ‘rise of China’ as a contestation with the US for global hegemony, and thus anticipate (even without sufficient empirical evidence) that Chinese acquisitions of farmland and natural resources in the world’s ‘peripheries’ would be key to this process, much the same way that European and US land grabs paved their own imperial rise in previous centuries (Hung, 2016; Sassen, 2013).

Since then, empirically-rich research has emerged that not only dispels the ‘myths’ of Chinese land grabbing across the Global South (cf. Brautigam, 2015), but most significantly that examines *how* and *why* such discourses have emerged if they do not reflect the political economic reality of the global land grab, and *who benefits* from this sinophobia (Oliveira, 2018). In fact, farmland acquisitions announced by Chinese actors often failed, while successful Chinese investors operate quite similarly as agribusiness companies from the Global North (Goetz, 2015; Oliveira, 2017), establishing control over agroindustrial productions and natural resources even when not acquiring farmland directly (McKay & Colque, 2016; Oliveira, 2018). Consequently, a new wave of fieldwork-based scholarship has shown that greater attention is necessary to the methodological and theoretical foundations upon which the ‘role of China’ needs to be examined in the global land grab, focusing especially on the concrete articulations between Chinese investors and local politics and business partners (Klinger & Muldavin, 2019; Klinger & Narins, 2018; Oliveira, 2019a).

Lu (2020) contributes precisely to this advancement in the literature. She critiques recent research and reporting on China’s rising land investments in Southeast Asia, showing that the idea of a homogeneous strategy for the procurement of large-scale concessions is not reflected in reality, but rather a product of Western biases that are often xenophobic and hypocritical. Instead, her extensive fieldwork places Chinese investments in relation to the political economy of subnational governance and ‘state fragmentation’ in Laos, and the distinct political ecologies of rubber and bananas, showing how these are the key factors that condition whether investors are able to access farmland, or fail to do so. Beyond simply demystifying exaggerated discourses of Chinese land grabs, therefore, Lu argues that in order to understand how Chinese agribusiness capital operates abroad it is imperative to undertake comparative and fieldwork-based research that

is attentive to the grounded political and ecological realities and power relations across multiple perspectives and scales.

Böhme (2020) in turn examines the political debates and regulatory responses to Chinese agricultural investments in Australia, demonstrating how the framing of Chinese agribusiness investments as ‘non-commercial’ and ‘state-led’ reflects more about the anxieties of Australian agribusinesses and state actors than the empirical reality of Chinese agribusiness capital. Nonetheless, these sinophobic imaginaries effectively triggered reregulation of foreign investments in Australian farmland and agribusiness, which selectively restrict Chinese investments perceived to be ‘strategic’ while still seeking to attract ‘commercially-oriented’ investments from China. This ambivalent attitude towards China also produces an ironic expansion of state regulatory authority over Australian agribusiness, even while it rests on neoliberal discourses for their legitimation.

Placing these new insights about the ‘role of China’ in the broader literature and debates about the global land grab does not excuse attempts by Chinese actors to launch large-scale acquisitions of farmland and natural resources abroad, or even justify their efforts to gain effective control over agroindustrial production and trade through other mechanisms (cf. McKay, 2018; Oliveira, 2018). Rather, moving beyond this framework of ‘Chinese land grabbing’ calls attention to the need for more careful analysis of the actual mechanisms through which transnational capital flows and articulates with various domestic actors around the world, regardless of their national identity and putative differences between state and market logics. Central to this effort is research on financial capital from the Global North, and its increasing and increasingly complex articulations with agribusiness firms in the Global South.

Financialization and land grabbing

The dramatically increased participation of the financial sector in farmland acquisitions worldwide has also been recognized since early on as a key characteristic that distinguishes the present moment from previous rounds of land grabbing, with the 2008 global financial crisis recognized as key driver of this phenomenon (Borras et al., 2011; GRAIN, 2008; White et al., 2012). Since then, research has clarified the role of finance in the global land grab (Gunnøe, 2014; Knuth, 2015; Ouma, 2014), including the relation between rural development finance and the operations of private equity funds (Daniel, 2012; Martin & Clapp, 2015), and the mechanisms through which farmland becomes a financial asset (Ducastel & Anseeuw, 2017; Li, 2014; Ouma, 2020). Important insights have also emerged about the greater importance of farmland in financial markets (Clapp & Isakson, 2018), the manner that agribusiness companies themselves and their land investments have become financialized (Salerno, 2014), and other convergences and divergences between financial and productivist logics in agribusiness investments (Fairbairn, 2014, 2020; Isakson, 2014; Ouma, 2015, 2016). These articulations even suggest the revival of a ‘rentier society’ in which agribusiness, mining, logistics, and even urban-industrial interests become controlled by financiers and/or adopt the speculative logics of finance (Gunnøe, 2014). Two contributions to our special issue advance this literature through deeper empirical analysis.

Spadotto et al. (2020) provide the most nuanced account to date of how transnational financial capital becomes involved in large-scale farmland acquisitions in Brazil. They expose the flows of information, legitimacy, capital, and political power (which they term ‘circles of cooperation’) between financiers from the Global North and major domestic agroindustrial conglomerates, who operate through new corporate vehicles for farmland acquisition, which in turn deflect critique of land grabbing by outsourcing their shady deals to land title falsifiers, corrupt notaries, and local

politicians. Thus, their research connects in-depth historical and geographical studies of *grilagem* (land title falsification) in Brazil's agricultural frontiers with cutting-edge studies of the new corporate architecture that serves as nexus between Brazilian agribusiness and transnational finance.

Sosa Varrotti and Gras (2020) undertake a similar analysis of what they term 'network companies' from Argentina. These are firms that pioneered and co-evolved with practices of outsourcing farm work (sowing, chemical spraying, and harvesting), incorporating leased farmland and corporate-style management, and adopting innovative financial instruments to fund their operations: from pooling savings among farmers themselves to the creation of derivatives, mutual funds, securities, and other financial products adapted to agricultural production and trade. As transnational finance capital began to gain control of these companies, their strategies began to shift as well towards speculative interests in farmland investment across South America. Yet Sosa Varrotti and Gras demonstrate that shareholder power is not always established in favour of financial investors, and as boundaries between agribusiness and financial capital become increasingly intertwined, the reorganization of firm strategies and operations cannot be simplistically reduced to earlier frameworks of financialization.

These contributions combined shed further light on the imbrications of productive, political, and financial interests in the establishment of new corporate vehicles for agribusiness expansion across South America, simultaneously exposing the mechanisms and limitations of financialization as a lens with which to understand new dynamics of large-scale farmland acquisition. Such nuanced analysis also enables better understanding of the weakest links in the finance-farmland nexus, which can be more effectively exploited by anti-capitalist forces. Rather than focusing restrictions on direct acquisition of farmland by foreigners, for example, it would be more effective to target regulations on capital flows themselves (Fairbairn, 2015; Oliveira, 2019b). Exposing and targeting capital linkages, moreover, can increase the risk for financial and institutional investors to participate in such deals (Li, 2015). Transnational campaigns involving anti-capitalist social movements, NGOs, academics, and journalists have already proved effective at countering farmland investments by Harvard University's endowment fund (McDonald & Freitas, 2018), and an ongoing campaign against the academic pension fund TIAA threatens to undermine the operations of a leading institutional investor (GRAIN & Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, 2020; Oliveira & Hecht, 2016). A breakdown in the operations of such leading institutional investors can undermine the entire business model upon which secondary and opportunist investors have been tagging along, and curtail the expansion strategies of domestic agribusiness companies and land brokers who have now come to rely upon transnational finance (ibid). As these contributions by Spadotto *et al.* and Sosa Varrotti and Gras reveal, therefore, political movements seeking to halt the expansion of agribusiness could benefit from advancing 'beyond land grabbing' to frame their struggles in terms of financial flows and instruments of rent-seeking more directly. Moreover, doing so enables this literature to engage more fruitfully with debates in global political economy about the nature of money, debt, and finance, so that neoclassical discourses and the current institutional architecture of finance are not taken for granted, but properly critiqued in terms that can reveal and promote more democratic and egalitarian alternatives.

Discussion and conclusion

Increased interest in farmland and agribusiness investments around the world has been palpable for the past decade or two, and the conjunctural phenomena that drive this 'global land grab' is undeniable. Nonetheless, the English literature⁴ on this phenomenon has also evolved to reveal the

limitations that such a framework might impose upon our understanding of the current dynamics of global agroindustrial restructuring, and the variety of processes that explain agrarian transformations in particular locations. The challenge has become, therefore, finding ways to properly theorize and carefully examine shifts in the forms of commodification of land and natural resources, transfer of ownership and control, and their articulation with complex sets of socio-ecological transformations that occur simultaneously, and distinctively, across various landscapes. These transformations certainly have macro-economic (and also political and ecological) drivers and broad strokes characteristics that have been identified since the early years of this literature and debate about the global land grab (e.g. increased participation by financial capital and investors from the BRICS and other emerging economies). Yet empirically-rich and theoretically nuanced research has simultaneously demonstrated the need for greater attention to political, economic, and ecological transformations that are not reducible to the simple framework of 'farmland acquisition' or even 'struggles over land' and natural resources.

In response to the 'global land grab' debate itself, for example, agribusiness capital advances through contract farming, and socio-ecological resistance to agribusiness investments often marginalize the ongoing struggles, needs, and interests of landless agricultural workers. Thus, frameworks that centre upon 'primitive accumulation' / 'accumulation by dispossession' need to be supplemented by parallel analyses of accumulation by the extended reproduction of agroindustrial capital (Harvey, 2010). This is not because these forms of capital advancement occur 'in parallel' with one another, and that the 'global land grab' framework is insufficient. But rather because we must comprehend how these dynamics occur dialectically, in and through each other. It is necessary to bring into focus the mechanisms through which agribusiness obtains control over not only farmland itself, but also control over the practices, products, profits, rents, and values generated from land it does not directly control. And in turn, how these dynamics drive displacement of peasants and other rural populations, and condition new forms of struggle over and about land. Thus, the insights and critiques emerging from the literature on the global land grab dovetail with debates about strategies for social and ecological innovation through contract farming for organic produce, the development of 'alternative food networks', and other efforts towards 'sustainability transitions', which may consolidate new forms of capitalist agribusiness and drive further concentration of land, wealth, and resources even as they establish new paradigms of sustainable agriculture (Gliessman et al., 2018; Guthman, 2014; Tsui et al., 2017; Zhang & Qi, 2019).

Similarly, as greater empirical details emerge about the dynamics of Chinese investments abroad, and the articulation between transnational finance and regionally embedded agribusiness corporations and other actors, the particular connections between finance and land needs to be problematized in relation to broader and more complex flows of capital, and discourses of national development or security that seek to legitimize agribusiness advancement. Such theoretical insight from critical methodologies become even more important as China's Belt and Road Initiative for infrastructure construction revives debates about the role of Chinese international investments in driving global transformations (Oliveira et al., 2020). Moreover, we are now living in the early moments of a global political, economic, and ecological crisis of epochal proportions. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic depression it has triggered are certainly going to transform the dynamics of agroindustrial development within countries, and the flows of capital and commodities between them. It is possible that a new wave of large-scale farmland acquisitions may be unleashed, and myriad forms of small-scale land grabs from below may unfold at the same time, while discourses of 'much needed investment' may once again be deployed in an attempt to legitimize this process. The abandonment of environmental regulations in the interest of

‘restarting the economy’, and the consolidation of agribusiness corporations in the interest of ‘national food security’ due to market disruptions are terrifying signs of this possible future. There appear to be fruitful grounds for further cross-pollination between critical agrarian studies critiques of land grabbing and agribusiness expansion with post-development critiques, degrowth frameworks, and environmental justice networks at large (Akbulut et al., 2019; Escobar, 2015; Gerber, 2020; Scheidel et al., 2018). The survival of the peasantry and the possibility for a thriving agroecological global movement cannot remain a mere backdrop in the critiques of land grabbing that predominate in the literature, nor a parallel topic of investigation without regard to the new dynamics of capital unfolding in recent decades. As we stand guard against the socio-ecological catastrophes on our horizon, we must bear close to our heart the theoretical, methodological, and political advancements made in the past decade, drawing lessons for sustainability transitions and agroecological alternatives while simultaneously unmasking the myths and material power relations of land and resource control (Oliveira, 2019b). Ultimately, the most important insights we identify are extending debates from farmland acquisitions and land struggles to broader contestations of natural resource governance and socio-environmental justice around the world.

Notes

1. This is not to deny that other scholars have made prominent contributions to this literature at this early moment from outside of these networks and journals (e.g. Carmody, 2011).
2. As evidenced by the references we cite, the *Journal of Peasant Studies* was and remains one of the pre-eminent forums for this scholarship and debate. Additional platforms that have published many of articles and hosted extensive debate on the phenomenon since 2008 include *Geoforum*, the *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Political Geography*, the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *Land Use Policy*, *World Development*, *Environment and Planning A and D*, *Antipode*, *Development and Change* and the *Review of African Political Economy*. Various academic presses also launched book series on related themes, most prominently the Cornell University Press series on ‘Land: New Perspectives on Territory, Development, and Environment’.
3. The term ‘land grabbing’ is not always used in the Chinese literature when referring to domestic land issues, in part due to the ambiguity of ownership, contract and use rights in China, among other factors (Ye, 2015). Yet there is no shortage of empirical evidence and academic debate about land grabbing within China (Siciliano, 2014; Yep, 2013; Zhang & Donaldson, 2013; Zhang, 2015).
4. It is important to note that there are many detailed and nuanced studies concerning land issues and agrarian change in many different languages other than English. Unfortunately, proper engagement with this literature is beyond the scope of this introduction.

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